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## **The possibility of disalienated work: Being at home in alternative organizations**

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### **Abstract**

Work organizations have long employed various management techniques in order to maximise workers' engagement, which in itself implies that 'alienation' at work is common. One of the central descriptions of alienation in classic writings is the idea of not being 'at home' whilst at work. In this paper, however, we explore its obverse, which we term 'disalienation'—a relationship to work based on assumptions concerning control and agency, aided by collective participatory mechanisms for identity construction and dialogical building of social relationships. We suggest that the concept and experience can be productively explored in the context of organizations which are owned and controlled by workers. Using ethnographic case studies from two Polish co-operatives, we discuss the potential characteristics of a disalienating relation to a work organization and suggest that co-operatives can provide a way for workers to be 'at home' whilst they are at work.

**Keywords:** alienation, disalienation, engagement, Workplace democracy, co-operatives, alternatives

## Introduction

Some sort of distinction between work and other forms of human activity is a fundamental one in the contemporary global north. This does not necessarily mean that such a separation is immutable or clear. Individuals and organizations routinely engage in boundary work producing separations which make sense in particular contexts (Cruz and Meisenbach, 2018). For example, the notion of work-life balance arose as a subject of academic and public interest (Jones et al., 2006; Mescher et al., 2010) because of the idea that certain forms of wage labour were assuming too central a place in forming contemporary identities (Chamberlain, 2018).

Almost two centuries ago, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels described such a separation as an inevitable outcome of capitalist labour conditions, asserting that the worker

...only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. (Marx and Engels 1844/2007: 72)

Not feeling at home is a powerful metaphor for the estrangement experienced, Marxists argue, because the capitalist mode of production objectifies labour, turning it into a commodity bought and sold in an exploitative market (Sayers 2011). It evokes notions of being at ease, security, and companionship stemming from an idealised understanding of homeliness which might not necessarily be reflected in one's living conditions. Nonetheless, Marx's pairing of not feeling at home with feeling outside oneself seems to point to a fracture between working and living arrangements which can generate this sense of unease.

Marx named this condition 'alienation', adapting the idea from a more general diagnosis of the human condition put forward by Hegel. In Marx's writings it gained a specific meaning as

an experience endured by workers who did not have control over their labour or its products. The concept has remained the focus of continued scholarly attention, albeit recently more often in the field of sociology (Kalekin-Fishman and Langman, 2015) than in organization or management studies (though see Endrissat et al., 2015; Golden and Veiga, 2015). In contemporary critical work, it has been applied most often to the estrangement felt by workers in post-industrial workplaces despite managerial attempts to produce various forms of affective attachment through ideas such as ‘teamwork’, ‘community’, ‘culture’ and so on (Barker 1993; Bauman 1998; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Vincent, 2011; Cederström and Fleming, 2012).

Our overarching research question in this paper concerns the obverse of alienation, which we call ‘disalienation’. What working conditions can foster disalienation? If alienated workplaces are the result of capitalist relations of production, then are collectively owned and controlled workplaces examples of labour which is not alienated? We explore these propositions by examining two organizations selected from a wider ethnographic research project on co-operatives and, we believe, demonstrate that disalienation can result from a process of providing meaningful agency in the workplace. This means that alienation is a process which, under certain conditions, can be reversed. We adopt the metaphor of ‘being at home’, a framing used by many of the participants and which provided the initial impulse for this paper because it was such a powerfully counter-intuitive way of describing a work organization. Homes are not always positive places of course, but in this context it seemed that they were being described as sites of belonging that allowed people to be themselves. We begin by discussing prominent views on workplace alienation before moving to refine our own understanding of alienation as a process and not a state. We follow this by

developing the concept of disalienation and embedding it within the literature on alternative organization, before introducing the field study and its methodology. The empirical section contains ethnographic material from two Polish co-operatives, and is followed by our analysis which attempts to articulate the key features of a disalienating workplace. We conclude with some thoughts on what it means to be ‘at home’ whilst at work.

### **Work and alienation**

It is a truism to assert that work plays a central role in processes of identity formation (Dejours, 2006; Harding, 2013; Chamberlain, 2018). However, it is equally true to say that modern organizations often produce forms of work which are individualising, fragmented and lack autonomy. In the Marxist tradition, alienation thus understood is taken to be caused by the worker’s inability to control the means of production. While this could be understood as primarily an issue of ownership, the problem is manifest in the worker’s separation from the process of creation, from the products of their labour, and from their co-workers (Marx and Engels, 1844/2007; Marx, 1845/1978). Capitalism divides societies into owners of the means of production and those who sell their labour, producing an exploitative dynamic which encourages the production of surplus on the one hand and the degradation of work and fetishization of consumption on the other (Marcuse, 1964; Braverman, 1974). As Marcuse suggests,

The worker is not [hu]man in the totality of [her/]his life-expression, but something unessential, the purely physical subject of "abstract" activity. The objects of labor are not expressions and confirmations of the human reality of the worker, but alien things, belonging to someone other than the worker—"commodities" (Marcuse, 2007: 93).

For Marxists, alienation is common to all capitalist work relationships. Labour is objectified into a commodity and that commodity is appropriated by the capitalist class. This reflects the intrusion of market forces into human relationships to the point where "life outside market relations and independent of commodities is unimaginable" (Brook, 2009: 19). It is also important for our argument to note that it constitutes a progressive development, spreading from shop floor and clerical workers to higher administrative levels and professions such as medicine and academia, as well as encompassing ever more aspects of the labour process. Management theory and practice are central to these changes in producing ever more refined techniques of employee control (Braverman, 1974; Jacques, 1996; Bauman, 2011). Almost all occupations are subject to routines of rationalization, specialization, and standardization, assisted by technological deskilling which results in experiences of disempowerment and meaninglessness (Blauner 1964; Caruana and Chircop, 2002; Archibald 2009).

Shantz, Alfes and Truss (2012) identified three factors which they see as antecedents to alienation: lack of voice, poor person-job fit, and meaninglessness of performed work. Unsurprisingly, they found that all three affected workers deeply, contributing to emotional exhaustion and diminished well-being. But the effects of alienation are argued to be important far beyond the workplace. Dejours and Molinier (1994) argue that work plays a crucial role in shaping identity, creating bonds and consolidating society. Work requires coordination in a way that generates co-operation. It provides social identity and mediation between the individual and collective. Widespread alienation does not encourage such relations, weakening social cohesion in the workplace and beyond. Co-operation and solidarity become less common and bonds between individuals and groups dissolve, making responsibility, commitment and intimacy less likely (Bauman, 2003). Other authors suggest

something similar, that alienation is both a broad diagnosis of the social and a subjective perception of unease (Jaeggi, 2014).

The ideas above provide a structuralist answer to the question of why workers become alienated. However, these answers are largely static (and pessimistic) in that they tend to describe alienation as a condition rather than a process. To understand the process of alienation, and to open up the possibility of a dialectical movement towards disalienation, we need to turn to writings that accentuate the dynamics rather than the causes of alienation. What we have described above still applies, but it is not to be understood as the inevitable outcome of certain structural conditions. Instead, alienation is seen as an ongoing process, extended in time and involving social actors who can both perpetuate and contest it (Touraine, 2000; Paulsen, 2014). This is in contrast to a worldview in which alienation is treated as a fact of life, a reality without reprieve. For Kaufmann (1980), for example, any attempt at avoiding alienation is either utopian or immature. The best one can hope for is a favourable "work-life balance" or perhaps life without work (Shelton, 2014; Chamberlain, 2018). But to argue this is to ignore that work can

bring out the best, provide pleasure and become part of the psychic economy as an irreplaceable mediator in the construction of one's sense of health and self-fulfilment (Dejours and Deranty, 2010: 170).

In Karl Polanyi's (1944/2001) account of the rise of market societies, the transformation to capitalism rests on the disassociating of economic activity from the sphere of social relations—in other words, making work unhomely. Yet, as Stiglitz (2001) observes, this disassociation is not and can never be complete: work is an element of life, and thus a necessarily social activity which includes the economic but is not reducible to it. This means

that the production of alienated labour relations can be contested and, as we show below, can differ depending on organizational context. Alienating labour can create misery, but disalienating labour can potentially be life enhancing (Bauman, 1998).

Summarizing the literature, we can describe the following characteristics of alienation as central - a perception of a lack of control and agency, the absence of meaning in work, a fragmented sense of identity, and social relationships which are exploitative.

Correspondingly, our idea of disalienation involves experience of control and agency, collective and participatory mechanisms for identity construction and dialogical building of social relationships. It is a broader concept than meaningful work, which has received considerable attention in recent years (e.g. Michaelson et al., 2014; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017), because alienation encompasses, but is not reducible to, questions of meaning.

Much current critical work tends to emphasize the various ‘escape attempts’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1976) which workers use to construct less alienated identities. In this vein, Costas and Fleming (2009) describe the strain between the sense of self and identities constructed with the intention of distancing oneself from alienating domination. What results is a kind of dis-identification, a self-alienation. Courpasson (2017) depicts organizational life as a struggle between tendencies to alienation and possibilities of emancipation, and Azambuja and Islam (2019) present an ethnographic study of middle level managers who regard themselves as both empowered and alienated: lacking autonomy and a sense of belonging, detached from their profession and other members of the organization. We share the dynamic view embraced by all these authors, yet our focus is not on workers within the capitalist workplace, but rather the examination of workplaces that consciously attempt not to produce alienated



experiences of work. Simply put, we think that alternative forms of ownership and control are experiments in producing disalienated workplaces.

### **Disalienating work**

If we consider alienation as neither a stable state, nor as a unidirectional and inexorable process which accompanies the modern, then this opens the possibility of investigating work and work organizations as more or less alienating, or disalienating. That is to say, we can begin to explore how to produce greater levels of meaning and engagement in economic activities. This involves infusing work with a sense of efficacy, and the precondition of this experience is a space for expressing opinions and being listened to. Disalienation suggests embedding the social in the economic, and encouraging a sense of connectedness to self, others, and world (Voss and Wilson, 2017). However, just like alienation, it needs to be understood as an ambivalent and contested process, not a final state. It can encourage denser social relations at work but it can also limit the expression of systemic critique and hence, for some, actually result in a greater feeling of estrangement from the organization (Endrissat et al., 2015).

The question of how disalienation is achieved is an empirical one and so our research examines experiences of work in organizations which we believe seek to disalienate and the most obvious sites for this kind of exploration are alternative organizations, particularly worker owned and controlled ones which explicitly address such issues directly in their practices (Erdal, 2011). There is a growing interest in alternative organizations, especially by scholars who wish to go beyond criticising the present in order to explore different forms of organization and economy. The idea that “there is no alternative” to neoliberalism, has, in the world of management and organization, meant that critique has often been aimed at existing

arrangements, and less work has been done on exploring alternatives (Eriksson and Kostera, 2019). Parker et al. (2007, 2014) have stressed that the term ‘organizing’ can be used to refer to a wide variety of patterns of co-ordination, and that is misleading to assume that market managerialism is the only or best form. For example, Wright (2010) presents as ‘real utopias’ a variety of contemporary democratic enterprises, from social capitalism to worker self-management. Alternative organizations also include movements which, as Reedy et al. (2016) demonstrate, can extend our understandings of organization, placing prefiguration at the core of what membership and participation mean. Bauman et al. (2015) propose that work organizations of this kind are currently marginal but present vibrant role models for future non-capitalistic management. The implications of this for wider understandings of organization and economy are radical with, for example, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) offering a guide for reframing mainstream business around the idea of reclaiming the economy, and its organizations, from capitalism. In a similar vein, Łapniewska (2017) argues that the idea of the commons – the common good as organizing principle, instead of private gain – is a viable principle for collective organization, and Kostera (2019) proposes a recycling and repurposing of conventional management ideas for common good organizers.

All these texts – and many others – tend to assume the possibility of disalienated, or at least less alienated, labour. That is to say, a worker who is treated with dignity, and whose labour helps them to achieve self-respect and do something useful for others (Hodson, 2001). After all, what would be the attractions of an alternative organization if it simply reproduced the power dynamics of a market managerial firm? Or, putting it another way, what are the affective consequences of worker ownership and control? The tendency in much of the literature on alternative organizations is to either assume that there are positive changes, without investigating them, or to explore the negative consequences of the failure of

alternatives. We propose that disalienation is an empirical question, not an either/or, and that it can and should be investigated. The next section will show how we began to address these questions.

## **Methodology**

In this text, we present two Polish co-operatives, studied as part of a wider ethnographic project analysing alternative organizations in Poland and the United Kingdom, conducted by one of the authors since 2012. Ethnographic methods make it possible to gain insight about local knowledge and the processes that lead to its development and construction, but we regard ethnography as more than a method. It is a perspective with roots in the humanities and social sciences and encourages an empathic yet simultaneously rigorous study based on prolonged and intensive immersion in the field (Van Maanen, 1988; Watson, 1994; Rosen 2000; Kostera 2007; Czarniawska, 2014). We seek to answer the questions we have formulated above through extended and concentrated presence in the field and the insights into the construction of local knowledge which it provides over time. Of course ethnographic data are not statistically representative of a broader population (in this case, of alternative organizations or co-operatives), they can nevertheless showcase the emergence and practice of cultural processes in context (Kostera, 2007; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), in ways that are richer than those available through other methods.

The initial scope of the study concerned self-supporting value driven organizations in Poland. These covered different organizational types, from informal groups to co-operatives, social enterprises and private businesses, and engaged in different kinds of operations, from offering space to other organizations and organizing networks, to a kindergarten, games workshop, bar and restaurant. During the second stage of the study additional organizations located in

England were added. In all, the number of organizations studied up to date is 18 in the UK and 16 in Poland. Out of these, 12 were selected for intensive and ongoing ethnographic contact. During the seven years there have been more and less intensive periods of research, from lighter engagement (several hours a week) through much more intensive (several days a week). The organizations were chosen through snowball sampling, which enables the field to define itself organically (Kostera, 2007). The researcher asked for recommendations of 'other, similar' organizations. The first organization (in Poland) was contacted on the recommendation of a key informant, a well-respected activist among the organizers. In the UK, two organizations were contacted initially (in Leeds and Sheffield) and then a similar snowball process was followed. The design of the study was iterative and empirically driven, in accordance with the principles of similar inductive and abductive studies (Czarniawska, 2014), allowing research problems to emerge through interactions with the field.

The main methods used were in-depth recurrent interviews with a limited number of key informants from each organization, as well as direct observations, and in some cases intensive shadowing. The primary methods used shifted from more formal and non-participant (recorded interviews, formal observations), to more informal and immersive (conversations, participant observation) during the course of the study. This trajectory reflected the gradual emergence of trust, as well as the ethnographer's increasing understanding of the context. Many of the studied organizations were initially wary of researchers, especially coming from a business school, and did not invite close contact. It took time and relationship work in order to build mutual understanding and respect. To date, 110 formal interviews have been recorded and transcribed, with a large number of informal (unrecorded) interviews and conversations described through field notes of 131 longer immersive observations and 50 shorter observations.

The study was about *being there*, and often being frequently in touch with these people, taking part in their work, their protests, sometimes their free time. Consequently, data analysis follows abductive logic (Peirce, 1955), with codes and concepts crossing organizational contexts as well as emerging at the interaction between field data and previous theorization. Inevitably, our engagement with literature has been iterative, in the sense that the discussion of alienation presented in the previous section was informed as much by our field study as by review of the extant literature. This paper grew from the analysis of the collected field material. Our attention was drawn to numerous stories, told by interviewees as well as emerging from field notes, touching on the topic of disalienated work, treated as a goal, as an impulse for action, but also as a description of life in their organization. Participants in the study tend to present a value system in which work is regarded as a cherished idea, not just an occupation or way of earning money, but an activity that is both personal as well as relational, a meaningful sociality, and the notion of being at home, or homeliness, appeared in many of their accounts.

The abbreviated (in relation to the study) form of a journal article poses a problem in terms of how to adequately present ethnographic data. In this case, the themes of homeliness of work and the struggle for disalienation were present in many, if not most of the observed organizations. However, rather than present decontextualized excerpts from a multitude of organizations, interviews, and field notes, we decided to choose two fairly typical organizations for which we will be able to provide adequate context, description, and analysis within the confines of this text. The organizations which we have selected were ones where multiple participants spoke at length about feeling at home, and where we could showcase the variety of nuances of disalienation which paralleled our findings from other sites. Such approach has been described as 'beachcombing' (Gabriel, 2014) or 'paradigm case selection'

(Flyvbjerg 2006). Both of the of the chosen organizations are based in Poland, though this was not a criterion for our choice. The field material presented below has been, thus, selected from 12 formal interviews, a large number of informal, unrecorded (but fieldnoted) conversations, and 35 observations. Unless stated otherwise, interviews quoted in this text have been conducted in Polish and translated by the researcher who conducted the fieldwork.

## **Findings**

### *The Good Co-operative*

Work is one of the central conversation topics among the co-operants. Gaia, an organizer from The Good Co-operative, put it quite succinctly:

Work [*is*] from each according to his or her abilities. It is being human together and changing the world for the better.

The Good Co-operative was created as an informal consumers' co-operative in 2013 in Warsaw by three women: Nina, Magda and Joanna. In the beginning they were working from temporary stalls set up in partner sites, such as a local community's public space in central Warsaw and a feminist library. By 2014, the co-operative achieved the formal status of a non-for-profit organization and its members began to look for a more stable site where, after a successful crowdfunding campaign, they set up a permanent grocery shop. A year later they opened another smaller shop in a less central location. They buy fresh and organic produce from local farmers and sell it in the shop at an affordable price. Co-operative members and customers alike see this as an important service for the local community, in an area where, in the recent years, cheap groceries have been replaced by more expensive chain stores.

Other important aims include supporting local farmers, increasingly disadvantaged by the growing consolidation of agricultural markets, and promoting the idea of healthy and ecological food and the advantages of co-operative forms of organizing.

We thought that if we want to organize access to this food on a different basis. These should be bottom-up, democratic principles in which we will not be interested in maximizing profits but in the satisfaction of needs, which we consider important social needs. Of course, for us an important point is [our] co-operative principles (Jack).

However, central to the co-op is providing members with a site for good, meaningful work, while also offering a few of them the possibility of a living income. Currently eight people are employed full-time by the co-operative (“at a common wage which we are trying to set at the national medium level”, Jack), but there are another 258 full members and 108 supporters. There is a monthly financial contribution that each member has to make, but the most important contribution is work, at least three hours each month. Work is considered a value in itself and crucial for membership.

Every person joining the co-operative makes a commitment for half a year. S/he becomes a co-owner of the store. S/he has the full right to participate in all decisions that the co-operative makes. S/he buys food at a price close to the producer's price and the extra addition [*to the producer's price*] is determined by us at strategic meetings, that is, at the meetings of the collective. Currently it's 8%. S/he joins the NGO and, of course, takes part in various events, also outside of the store, because you should remember that the co-operative is not only a shop, but also activities such as organizing a congress or smaller educational or integration events. Such are our rights. However, there are also duties, it's the work. Every person who wants to participate in the co-

operative declares that s/he will dedicate at least 3 hours a month to mandatory duty (Jack).

The duty of work is taken seriously and, even though it has been discussed several times at meetings, it remains mandatory for the co-operants. The activists like to emphasize the significance of the principle, sometimes juxtaposing it with money, as in the quote below, to show that whereas the latter is symbolic, the former is real value:

So there was a discussion here too, what to do with people who want to pay the financial contribution, because they have the money, but do not want to work. ... we decided that engagement in the community through work is a very important value for us and that we want to build on that. Without that people will not understand the idea [*of the co-operative*] without giving some effort and something of oneself. Money is easy to give, but it is more difficult to give the time for some common cause. (Adam).

The resulting surplus is not kept on as accumulated symbolic value (profit) but immediately directed to supporting the work of farmers – the partners of the co-operative. This is also a legal requirement for the co-operative cannot produce financial profit. The co-operants stress that they have opted for such a form deliberately.

We can't, because we are really dedicated to the idea of being a non-profit organization, and so we are formally non-profit, so the surplus we generate we invest in the organization. Because we want to, and because we have to (Bea).

The [financial] profit goes to the people, to the community and the organization of the whole thing. (Adam).

Work is not considered a quantifiable value. Members differ in how much work they provide, with some choosing to contribute every week or even more often. The levels of engagement



vary not only between members, but also often fluctuate over time. New members often begin by being very active, then gradually drop off to settle at a lower level contribution. Conversely, there are cases like Adam's, who began as an occasional contributor only to increase his involvement over time, and has now become one of the permanent employees, responsible for external relationships.

At a certain point, I decided that, okay, I would sign up and do something. So I signed up for the function of preparer of packages. It was an important experience for me, I felt that I lack many organizational things. I had to engage more to fix things, to make them work better. I felt that thanks to that I was giving something of myself, this was making sense; that others were doing that as well, that we were working together.

(Adam)

Tasks are chosen to suit both the preferences and the perceived strengths and shortcomings of each contributor. Members can choose which tasks to perform and there is significant space for individual contribution. Engagement is not uniform, simultaneously individually differentiated and communally performed. Through work allocation, room is made for both individual variation and collective unity.

In the beginning, when we were still working as an informal group, there was a form with details about who can do what, who has which skills and not others, who has a car, who lives where. It worked, somehow. People who came here told us what they can contribute [...] during informal conversations. And now there is a form, like the one we had then, where they can add [*what they can do*]. If someone is not up to date in what we are doing, they can come to one of our working groups and come up with something to do there (Adam).

The collective aspect of work organizes the social side of the co-op. It is during work that members mostly get to know each other, and self-presentations or conversations are no substitutes for relationships that form during shared tasks.

Apart from running the shop we are also doing other things, such as trying to integrate our collective, which is a challenge, because it's so big. For example, we have a co-operative ball, such as the one today: an occasion to get to know each other. We also organize meetings with farmers, because we feel it's important to have contact with them. We try to visit our suppliers several times during season. Often it means helping them around the farm (Jo).

For Jo, the collective activities are clearly purposive: fostering connections within and outside the organization; they are a serious work commitment. Other participants stressed the joy of shared social activities:

General meeting Sunday. Before, Friday – ordinary meeting. Then, baking festival. Then, exchange of clothes. All these are ways of integration for the collective. Last time we had so much fun, we couldn't stop laughing, a mood that literally grabbed us (Gaia).

Collectivity is thus simultaneously associated with fun, a good time, but also with a seriousness of purpose. While individual emphasis in the accounts we collected differs, on the whole these two sides are treated with equal attention.

Work is, furthermore, the foundation on which structures are being built. The workers themselves propose, create and change work procedures with a view to helping themselves and others perform the work well. Procedures are not described as dictating behaviour; rather they are developed to serve workers as a form of stabilized organizational knowledge.

Everyone, including new members, has the right to alter procedures, if they find the existing ones lacking or have ideas for improvement. However, it is collectivity that turns these individual working preferences and engagements into structure: the process involves intensive communication and may discourage some from even trying. Adam describes how one such procedure was created and how it continues to be developed:

There is the retail service procedure here in the store, and the procedure for dealing with our members who come into the shop or wish to order something. We have introduced a rota of Day Coordinators who work every day from 15:30 to 19:30. They are volunteers, they work at the till. They have the retail service procedure, but also training for receiving deliveries, for preparing invoices and the like. This was partially a response to our previously relying on a small group of qualified members, who then needed to stay in the shop the whole time, and it's somewhat cold in here.

The emergent structure is not defined by uniformity or standardization. While some tasks are described in minute detail and leave little room for individual experimentation, other aspects of the work leave a lot of space for individual variance. Our observation notes show that different members working at the till adopt varied styles of behaviour and communication, and often chat with the customers. Conversations are often communal, involving a number of customers and not only the person currently being served at the till. Customers who are members of the co-operatives are usually on a first name basis with the workers, other regular customers use the familiar terms and endearments usually reserved to neighbours.

Any alterations in the existing structure are collective and need to go through a thorough a consultation process.

The person bearing overall responsibility for the activity to be regulated sends out their proposals, tests solutions on a small scale, such as specific rules for new members, and makes sure that the new procedures are comprehensive. Then we consult all members. This really makes things easier and makes our internal organization clearer. [...] [F]or instance, in trying to organize the selling and redeeming of Christmas coupons. They were to be valid for one month, until the end of January, but we later extended that period as many recipients failed to use them (Adam).

The structure is democratic and impressively well organized. People do not speak out of turn, decisions are implemented, ruled are honoured. An organizer who used to work for a multinational corporation as an IT specialist, observed:

If managers from [my] corporation came here, to one of our meetings, they would be amazed. Everyone speaks their minds, but we keep to the agenda. Hand up. Respect. What should be obvious [everywhere] but usually is not. Sure, we are democratic members, we are not very experienced, but here everything goes so, pardon the word, efficiently (Donna).

It is, however, not just sustainability and economic aspects or structure that are linked to the role of human work in the organization. It is regarded as a much wider strategic value. The organizers talk often and freely of their ambitions to become part of a world outside of capitalism, not just during interviews, but in everyday conversation, or at parties with beer in hand. One of our key contacts, Gaia, proposed that what they were doing -

is a new form of business, outside of capitalism. Only during a crisis and when there is a lack of things and opportunities, people are forced into experimenting with this form,

beyond the margins of the system. But it's the future, or, it can be, if we put our hearts and minds to it.

The members' ambitions continually involved more than running a grocery store. In an article published in the daily *Metro Warszawa*, the Good Co-operative is presented as

not just a shop. It is also a common place for 75 people, where they organize workshops, meetings, it is also a school of democracy and co-operation (Bet, 2014: np).

While engaging with the everyday life of the co-op, the workers are responsible for what they do and also have an active role in shaping their environment. For example, they get to choose music they like to be played in the shop and there is explicitly a ban on service scripts, with people being encouraged to “act human” (from fieldnotes) even if it sometimes means that they are not exuberant or overly cheerful with clients. The ethnographer has observed several instances of rather curt reactions to impolite or bossy clients.

Work is constantly celebrated, not just in the manifestos pinned to the walls, but also in the gestures and the energy displayed by everyone present. In the interviews, members affirmed that the values the co-operative stands for are important to them, but the most important ones are shared work, and the building of relationships: within the collective, but also with others, such as farmers and the local community. Consequently, working in the Good Co-operative involves continuous and intensive emotional and relational labour, requiring not only awareness of the presence of others but also incessant communicative effort, negotiating both similarities and differences. If you work there it is not possible to be a lone wolf, a star, or an individualistic genius. It is also very hard to be an introvert.

The strong and recurrent links between performing individual and collective aspects of work we refer to by the metaphor of “being at home”. Workers make themselves at home in the

workplace by many different means. They bring their personal items, such as mugs, coffeepots and mascots, but also own tools when needed. The organization provides a space for workers to rest, which they may use to spend their free time, relax, as well as socialize. There are liminal spaces, without a defined function, which can change with need, for example, a room in a neighbouring house can be used as extra storage or as social space for workers. The 'homely space' is almost always quite collective and sometimes contested. For example, a relatively new member intended to occupy the space in the kitchen to take coffee but was interrupted by an older member, who pointed out that this particular area was for collective and not individual use. It is possible to have coffee on one's own, but it is not very common.

The role of space is crucial. Recently an office space was acquired in between the two shop outlets. It is an apartment, with bathroom and kitchen. The members use it for work and for spending their free time. They sit around chatting, reading, cooking, having seminars and parties, sometimes sleeping. The term 'u nas', 'at our place', is often used about all of the locations ('the seminar is at our place'), depending on context. The researcher sometimes has problems in figuring out which place is referred to in a conversation, but the members seem to know which place is meant.

### *The Vegan Place*

Our second case is an organization that explicitly aims to replace traditional employment arrangements. Work is as fundamental as in the Good Co-op, however, it is differently structured. The Vegan Place is a restaurant founded and run by the Marginal Co-op and consists of two distinct groups. The 'inner circle' (the term used by co-operative members) consists of eleven full-time members and three persons aspiring to full membership with

similar backgrounds and shared (albeit not identical) social and ecological engagement, while a 'wider circle' comprises a loose grouping of up to one hundred supporters enjoying fewer responsibilities and benefits. What unites these different strata is a platform of shared values.

In Luke's words, green values are for them

not only a marketing ploy. For us it's a path, our way of seeing the world. For example, I use the same rules at home. It is not, like, detached from reality, it is an expression of my worldview and conviction. We try to promote [green values] and we try to draw the attention of the customers to [them].

The second fundamental value is work itself. The Marginal Co-op describes its purpose as providing engaging work for its members, foregrounding their skills and interests. Mark, one of the founding members, summed it up as being

created by us and for us, to be able to work in conditions that are nowadays very difficult to find on the job market, for people with qualifications that we might have, or not.

The Co-operative was founded in 2013 and initially offered only catering services while simultaneously trying to overcome the difficulties of opening a new restaurant in Warsaw. The primary obstacles were bureaucratic, with local authorities unused to the non-profit formula of the co-operative requiring nonstandard contracts and different business rates. The process proved much lengthier and more costly than the founders anticipated, but finally they opened in spring 2015. The slowness of establishing the restaurant became something of a founding myth and was repeatedly described as a wellspring of resilience for the organization. Mark recalled that during the first months of the restaurant's organization the staff had a workload of over 250 hours per person per month. He credited the patience

learned before the opening of the restaurant with fostering the ability to endure difficult situations while maintaining hope of improvement. This example shows that it is not necessarily 'effectiveness' that is valued in the effort they put down, but the perseverance and the effort itself.

However, they also pride themselves in the effects of their work. The opening of the restaurant met with a positive response of from a clientele who appreciated an establishment offering tasty and healthy food at affordable prices as well as a place to meet and socialize.

[A] lot of people live somewhere on the margins of the community, they are invisible, because they either sit at home or else they sneak around in the evening, collect empty cans. There are many people living like that, when you live in the centre. I have been working in the centre for a long time, I often walk down Wilcza street and observe life. Shop windows, omnipresent, showing how great it is in the city centre. Everything is expensive, as if only pretty and rich people lived here. But when you walk in the street and look at the people passing by, you realize that this is all unreal. It just looks that way but there are many people who only live here [...] and who don't take part in the life of the place in any way. (Mark).

The spatial aspect is as important as for the Good Co-op, however, for the Vegan Place it is extended to embrace the consumers. Warsaw no longer has any many public spaces that could be used as community spaces 'where you could go to a square and sit, without paying, without having to buy anything' (Mark). The Vegan Place was created to offer a setting where local residents can sit and socialize for the price of a relatively inexpensive meal or a drink. It appears to have succeeded at least partially, as our observations suggested that the customers were older and less expensively dressed than other establishments in the area. This



was also supported by the co-operative members in interviews and by more thorough observation of visitor behaviour: many customers bought only a single item, be it a dish or a drink, and stayed for extended periods in the restaurant. Again, as at the Good Co-op, the definition and use of space provides a link between different elements of the organization. This leads to certain patterns of communication and sociality, some similar to the Good Co-op and some different. For the members of the Marginal Co-op, relationships are built on the foundational principle of co-operation at work. That is why they like using the anglicism *kooperatywa* (with its root in the word co-operation) rather than the Polish word *spółdzielnia* (etymologically related to sharing). The work is based on

a kind of horizontal principle, where there is no hierarchical system. We are used to it, even though it is very difficult to work in this way. [...] And it is somehow a great fulfilment of everything one believes in, in the sense that at a certain point [*this*] transfers itself to a very important area of your life, which is work. And at a certain point this ceases to be "just" work and becomes something much more. [...] It's a bit, like, it's difficult to leave after work. Some of the workers have problems with that. It's not quite about the duties but the atmosphere. We all treat this place as our home, here we meet good energy and we don't feel like leaving (Mark).

Work and sociality seem to merge in conditions where people feel that decision making reflects their own choices and preferences.

The positive thing is that you have a feeling that we decide things together. There is no hierarchical structure, no passive following of instructions from above. It's we who have influence and we make the decisions. It comes out better or worse [...], but we

still have the feeling that it is our common good, that we do it together. There is a sense of being in a community that manages and takes responsibility (Luke).

Members tend to describe their work as centred around doing things together for each other and for others. The social dimension is crucial, because it defines the core of who they are and what they do. As with the Good Co-operative, there is no place for people unwilling or unable to communicate sincerely and intensively. This level of engagement is an area where problems can arise and this organization solves them by the dual stratification mentioned earlier. New members are accepted first on probation, and fully admitted only once they have proven their ability to co-operate. Difficulties arise when a prospective member does not want to co-operate as much as the unspoken norms of the co-operative require. We were told of one such person who, after being confronted with charges of low engagement, worked to turn the situation around and began to attend most of the meetings. Only then was he fully accepted.

Like the Good Co-op, the Vegan Place is a business that covers its costs. This issue is, here, even more strongly framed as both economic and inherently social. Asked about the organisation's finances, Mark accepted that raising income was an important goal. However, he hastened to add, profit is not their aim; steady finances are just a means to the end, which is about providing people with good work. Or as Magdalena said 'We need to earn our upkeep, implement the new stuff that's been decided upon. There is no wild thrust forward.' They are a non-profit organization but they strive to achieve a kind of 'social profit' consisting of the building of relationships. This means that the structure is not regarded as final by members, but rather a problem that needs attention.

The organizational structure is quite shaky. There are no concrete areas in which we act and everyone knows what they are responsible for. [...] People think it's going to be fine anyway, there's no reason to become attached to this or that restrictive commitment or arrangement. (Luke).

The solution is 'engagement', by which they mean work and an unending investment in relationships which is continually used to address problems which structures and policies cannot cover. This is a kind of -

... micro support that is often priceless for us, and also for the others. Just an exchange of small services, it makes a huge difference. If not we would have to rely only on the logic of the market and pay our way. Sure, there are things that are worth paying for, but some, we do not feel that they are the right way to spend money. Things are there to be used, when someone needs them it's better to exchange them (Mark).

This dual focus on the social and the economic results in a strong attention to matters of fairness, whether in terms of work allocation or salary levels. On the one hand, the shared egalitarianism lent support to the notion of equal pay, but, on the other, some workers advocated higher pay because of the superior skills of some members. One of the members of the inner circle reflected that the central dilemma is that of acting simultaneously in two roles: of employee and employer. As an employee one seeks higher pay, and as an employer one wishes the co-operative to develop more quickly. In the end, credibility in such discussions is determined by personal engagement in the co-operative. The person or the group viewed as the most central to the co-operative, who works the most hours and takes part in all the meetings, is perceived as the most authoritative and largely deferred to in contested decision making. However, one protracted disagreement did result in members

splitting into two camps. A splinter collective was formed, and founded a new outlet nearby, still sharing the same funding and institutional framework, but offering sweets and coffee rather than full meals. The two groups are not in conflict but they seldom meet. According to all of the interviewees, this is not a good or stable situation and one which may yet cause problems because lack of contact invites future misunderstandings and conflicts.

As in the Good Co-operative, structure gets talked about in terms of both individual difference and collective unity, however, here it manifests itself mainly via issues of coordination and tends to come up repeatedly in terms of the division of labour. Most of the workers have definite preferences as to their favoured roles in the restaurant, but the established practice requires swapping roles and tasks during the working week. Preferences are taken into consideration, but everybody has to perform each duty at some point. This invites complaints but members' meetings are quite successful in reframing grumbling as a shared experience of the burden of responsibility and, in our interviews, rotating duties were repeatedly stressed as an important principle for the organization to uphold. Many members consider varied work experience as an important factor in developing responsibility for the whole of the work process. This is seen as both a source of empowerment and of anxiety.

This is certainly agency, in the sense that you feel that what happens is the result of your decisions, your work. And this also teaches a lot about the wider society that we live in, where everyone complains and yet shifts the blame as far away from themselves as possible. The co-operative is like a kick up the bum in that regard [*because*] blame is always to be found among the co-operative members. It is not possible to blame any failures on a bad supervisor (Mark).

Just as the Vegan Place brings responsibility home, so is the word also used also in a literal sense. Several of the workers live nearby and regularly move between home and work. Breakfast in the workplace before opening time is not uncommon. The workers have been actively participating in the renovation and furnishing of their workplace and made decisions about which equipment to buy, how to design the area for employees and customers, which work procedures to adopt and so on. Some of the furniture has been made by members themselves (a common occurrence in several of the studied organizations). When a tool is needed only occasionally, the workers prefer to borrow from other co-operatives or neighbouring businesses, than to buy or lease. This is also a space for members who just want to spend time there, although, just as with the Good Co-operative, it is very difficult to find a place where one can be alone. However, people who do not mind sharing space are often talking about how much at home they feel there. This is not always a cheerful comment, but sometimes refers to perceived irresponsibility, or even a sense of entitlement: 'they make a pigsty of the toilet, they feel at home here'. Also, some of the regular customers tend to spend long hours at the Vegan Place, bringing own work, books, board games and pets. In an informal conversation, one of the regulars, a formally dressed employee at a nearby business said that he kept coming here for lunch not because he was vegan (he was not), or even because he liked the food (he preferred more upmarket food nearby), and definitely not because he could not afford a more expensive lunch, but because he felt at home in this place. Like the Good Co-operative, the Vegan Place space builds links between the individual and the collective and performs democratic practice by simultaneously engaging participants as differentiated and as part of a group.

### **Disalienating workplaces as homes**

So how do our two cases illustrate the concept of disalienation? In this section, we will discuss the central features of these workplaces and show how we understand them to exemplify a process of continually labouring against alienated relationships, both with work and with co-workers. Through this process, understandings of ‘home’ are being constructed on a daily basis.

In all the organizations we have studied, both these two and the others, there is a clearly articulated connection between work and personal and social flourishing. The work that each of the members contributes is invariably construed as important not just on an individual or organizational level, but also as a meaningful form of social participation. This is the feature most clearly aligned with Marx’ original analysis of alienation as a distortion of an individuals’ relationship towards their own creativity and labour (Khan, 1995). None of our interviewees had any difficulty in describing why they were engaging in particular tasks or, more generally, working for this particular organization.

Our accounts of the both the Good Co-operative and the Vegan Place are very positive, perhaps suspiciously so. However, it is not our intent to imply that these organizations (or, indeed, the others forming part of the wider study) are oases of happiness. Arguments, disappointments, and frustration were certainly present in the field material, and some members left as a result of particular disappointments. And yet we have been unable to link any of these problems to the general features of alienation we identified earlier. Instead, these organizations and their members actively engaged in disalienation processes, albeit with some important differences between the two. In our analysis, we will begin by reflecting on

these commonalities and differences before opening the discussion towards wider possibilities of counteracting workplace alienation.

The co-operative structure of both organizations is not an accident, but neither does it present an easy solution for solving the issue of workplace alienation. Marx explicitly linked alienation to the ownership of the means of production, specifically the private ownership of economic assets. In the Polish context, co-operative movements (not necessarily underpinned by Marxist ideas) have long been discussed as a possible way of creating disalienating workplaces (Abramowski, 2012; Wolski, 2015; Blesznowski, 2018). More widely, despite a long history of favourable evaluation and enthusiastic predictions for co-operative organizations in academic studies (Staber, 1992; Nilsson and Björklund, 2003; Erdal, 2011, Parker et al 2014), they continue to play marginal roles in contemporary economies. A recent study which examined what was termed ‘human-based organizations’ (private enterprises espousing humanistic values and engagement with employee creativity) operating in Spain, came to ambivalent conclusions regarding the potential of these organizations to combat worker alienation (Valenzuela-García and Molina, 2013). The study detected signs of both emancipation and of exploitation, and crucially for our argument, they suggested that the ownership structure was one of the sources of long-term problems regarding worker engagement and emotional investment.

In contrast, our informants exhibited strong enthusiasm bordering on fervour towards both the shared goals and the organizations themselves. This did not appear to be particularly strongly correlated with either position within the organization or the length of involvement. Where the two organizations differ is in the depth and scope of participation. The group running the Vegan Place are from a similar age group with left-wing leanings, albeit with

different inclinations: there are a few feminists, several vegans, some vegetarians, a few anarchists, socialists, as well as more liberal democrats. They also have different interests: while some love cooking, others are more into construction, music or travel. The collective encompasses people from different nationalities, and some do not speak Polish fluently. The Good Co-operative consists of a much more diverse group of people, aged from early twenties to pensioners, most politically left-leaning but also some centrists and conservatives, many with some ecological awareness but not all in the same sense, there exist deep ecologists, green mystics, and simply people who are interested in farming or just enjoy the countryside.

Interestingly, in the meetings we observed, the former were more emphatic in highlighting their differences and the weekly meetings could become quite turbulent. The Good Co-operative members typically focused discussions and meetings on seeking common ground, even between people holding and often eloquently expressing radically different ideas. But such proclamations were followed by (long) group discussions culminating in establishing some kind of understanding. In both organizations ‘consensus’ (Eichler, 2007) was never aspired to. While commonalities or shared values were often acknowledged, we found no indication of a search for common spirituality or ideology. Indeed, members of both organizations expressed their involvement in an explicit task of accommodating diversity. Both co-operatives consciously aligned themselves with radical inclusivity (Nawratek, 2015): an attempt to incorporate difference and divergence into the very fabric of organizing. Whether we should treat this as a particular feature of these organizations, or a more general feature of disalienating workplaces, is a matter for further study.



One final unifying feature of both the organizations described above, and others we have studied in the course of our research, is collective decision making. Both co-operatives were adamant about abolishing hierarchy, spending much time on discussion, and exhibiting openness towards dissenting opinions and disagreements within the organizations. It seems to us that in disalienating settings, obedient subordination is replaced by active engagement. The disalienation of work which is experienced by most of the participants is a process which moves towards the ideal of democracy in the workplace, as well as wider expectations about time, space and inclusion (Wolff, 2012). These are organizations which actively strive to make their members feel at home.

## **Discussion**

Work is the most important activity in which man engages, for it provides *the* standard for judging his [*or her*] worth. [...] This suggests that financial incentives may not be the sole driving force in work: rather, an unquenchable urge exists in man's breast to make work meaningful (Seligman, 1965: 338-339).

Seligman sees work as "an essential attribute of existence" and warns: "[e]liminate or empty work of meaning and grave difficulties are inevitable" (p. 342). While we should remember that in earlier societies economic work was not disassociated from the rest of social life (Polanyi 1944/2001), our aim is not to advocate a return to a lost golden age. Rather, we are interested in thinking about how we can become at home when we are at work as a practical and contemporary matter of ownership and control. Seligman goes on to suggest that the solution to the problems of alienation is not by focusing on leisure either, which he believes has been "converted into a mirror image of modern work; it is equally meaningless and equally incapable of carrying the burden of culture" (Seligman, 1965: 360). Making work

more like leisure, it seems to us, leads to attempts at creating playful workplaces (Kane, 2004) which push employees to self-exploitation, making them harness their most private abilities such as imagination and desire to work in the service of tasks and institutions they have no control over or power to work with or against (Hochschild, 1983; Costea et al., 2005; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Cederström and Fleming, 2012).

Our study suggests the possibility of a different way of thinking about work, and the notion of feeling at home while at work allows us to do. While play is an activity that can take place in a home setting, no home is completely defined by playfulness or fun. The idea of home carries varied meanings, positive, in the sense of being relaxed, and negative, as a place of deadening routine, or even oppression. As a metaphor appearing throughout our material, it captures a combined a sense of belonging and responsibility, of being in the right place, but also bearing obligations. Being part of something, but also finding it difficult to have any distance from it.

In both organizations presented, as well as in most of the others studied in our research project, the relationship between home and work is profoundly complex. In both organizations there was a strong sense of the workplace itself being a kind of a home for the employees. This includes providing a space for the employees to hang around and, if necessary, to sleep, but does not stop there. Thus, the Good Co-operative is described by its members and outsiders alike as more than just a shop, but as a place to live in. Similarly the Vegan Place is seen as a kind of common room to be together in, to work and to socialize. Both were also described as providing a home for a broader community, comprising customers and local residents. This is also evident in the field notes describing the ethnographer's responses, repeatedly commenting on the sense of belonging she felt, and on

the inclusivity directed at guests and visitors such as herself. Sitting for hours in the shop or in the restaurant felt completely normal and unproblematic because there were many other people using the space to hang out, together with others or alone.

These descriptions might remind us of accounts of workplaces filled with props from leisure and home life: bean bags, ping pong tables and game consoles (e.g. Georganta, 2016; Salati and Focardi, 2018). Such spaces, while in many ways evoking a similar notion of homeliness, rest on a more manipulative form of social engineering. As Costea et al. (2005) suggest, most of these workplaces effectively infantilize their workers, with managers casting them as creative children who work better when entertained. The overriding metaphor is that of the license of a teenager's room rather than the obligations of an entire household. In the organizations we studied, it is the conjoined sense of agency and responsibility that defines what it means to be at home.

What emerges is a connection between place and sociality. Disalienating social practices are able to develop when employees feel ownership of their workplace and the relationships within it. The material shows that this does not mean that the boundaries between home and work are erased. Instead, the word 'home' tends to be correlated with notions of being in control of space and using it to develop relationships and skills. Being 'at home at work' is, in these workplaces, a process rather than a static condition, and through it a sense of agency and efficacy allows the worker to feel in the right place, and this feeling encourages an assumption of responsibility which, in turn, encourages further agency. This moves us away from thinking of workplaces as either alienated or disalienated, but opens up space for considering disalienating ones, where disalienated work is both possible and commonly encountered.

The problem of alienation can ultimately only be solved, according to Marx, by the socialisation of the means of production. This is a very broad diagnosis, and not one we wish to comment on here, because in this paper we are more concerned with the detail of two individual workplaces, and the sorts of arrangements that they employ. Gorz (1999: 78) proposes that in order to develop new workplaces we need a radical imagination. 'We have to think through those exemplary experiences which explore other forms of productive co-operation, exchange, solidarity and living.' In his terms, the workplaces we have explored above are increasing "the spaces and resources which enable alternative socialities to be produced, which allow modes of life, co-operation and activities to emerge, that lie outside the power apparatus of capital and the state" (79). They can be understood as exemplifying a mode of organizing and work in a possible society - radical experiments, but neither impossible nor unique, and being produced in practice in many alternative organizations on a daily basis.

These are ways to arrange work which enhance perceptions of agency and meaning, which we regard as evidence of disalienation. They contribute to a sense of being in control, but where control is understood fluidly, as an emergent and collective property, and which produces an enthusiasm which is mentioned again and again in conversations with the organizers. This process takes place in organizations that explicitly understand themselves to be alternative, and where participants share an understanding of their work as an authentic expression of the self as well as a relational construction and expression of sociality.

Importantly, these are places where workers discuss how to do their work better, and this includes actively guarding against the emergence of exploitative structures. Disalienating workplaces are simultaneously present and future-oriented, and represent a practice of 'being at home' in that people are engaged with their labour and each other in order to construct

spaces which are inviting and also partly sheltered from the outside. The world that they make within such spaces is utopian, in the sense of being a projection of the present into a desired future (Parker et al., 2007; Wright, 2010).

Our material suggests several contributions. First, that the idea that work is a basically disagreeable chore that has to be presented as 'fun' in order to generate enthusiasm is itself a result of the alienating processes of capitalism, not a defining characteristic of work itself. The processes of disalienation that we have presented here involve a deliberate and continual separation from dominant ideas about organizing and work, a positioning of the organization at least partly outside of the capitalist system. Second, disalienation is a purposeful process, based on principles of workplace democracy and held together as a result of continual labour. It is not a state which, once achieved, can be assumed, but an orientation to work and organization which requires continual cultivation and effort. This suggests that the distinction between orthodox and alternative organizations cannot be reduced to structure, but necessarily rests on prefigurative practices which bring the organization into being through constant labour. Third, we show how disalienated work helps to provide workers with a sense of 'being at home' which does not rely on simple notions of happiness or wellbeing, but is problematic, difficult and produces both conflict and collaboration. However, it is not alienating, because it explicitly produces a link between individual and collective agency.

## **Conclusion**

So, what are the lessons from our studies to others who would seek to establish and move towards disalienating forms of labour? Firstly, there has to be a sense of agency and co-ownership. Co-operatives offer a good basic structure for not just creating, but also sustaining this precondition over extended periods. Employees develop a sense of responsibility if they

participate in the organization and if they regard it as a common good, not a source of profit for someone else. This is not to say that all co-operatives will be like this, because many are clearly not, or that owner-managed organizations will have none of these features. Yet it seems to us that a co-operative structure will lead to a co-operative practice. Secondly, the structure must be grounded on democracy, not just for the majority, but based on a radical inclusion which strives at involving all voices, including dissenters. This means that structures need to prevent the accumulation of power by a certain person or group. Thirdly, there should be physical space which employees can treat as theirs, where they can be in control and be present in an embodied way. It does not have to be a place for 'fun', it can be a place of responsibility and work, but one about which they can determine the conditions that are right for their work, as defined by the workers themselves, as well as being open to use and personalization. Just as home is not always a matter of fun and harmony, so the sense of 'being at home' at work does not necessarily mean contentment, but rather a commitment to producing embodied collective presence.

Many commentators have suggested that work organizations of this kind are currently marginal but that they present models for organizational practice (Parker et al., 2007, 2014; Parker and Parker 2017; Bauman et al., 2015). Based on our research, we propose that these alternatives also open the possibility of what Marx described as the affirmative and reciprocal characteristics of labour, or what we are calling disalienated work. Marxist forms of critique often focus on the problems with the present, and this may be why the literature on alternative organizations has an ambivalent relationship to Marxism. We hope that this paper shows how a central concept in Marxist theory might be rethought and turned towards better understanding alternative organizations. As we suggested at the beginning, a tendency in some of the literature is to assume positive changes in orientations to work, without

investigating them, or to instead concentrate on the problems with failing alternatives. We think that our paper demonstrates that disalienation is an empirical question, and one that deserves further study in different alternative organizations in different contexts. This is an empirically and politically crucial step in justifying a move to an economy based on different relations between people and their employers. If the worker objectifies her individuality and life through her work, and the customer finds enjoyment in satisfying a need in full consciousness of the labour that went into it, then "[o]ur products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature" (Marx, 1844/1986: 34).

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